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ACHAEMENID VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ROYAL FIGURES

Visual representations of Achaemenid kings, while indebted to established Mesopotamian iconographic conventions, betray distinct understandings of sovereignty. Royal reliefs, glyptic and molded bricks are highly modeled, a trait that has been attributed to the influence of Greek carvers but could readily have been a further development of Late Babylonian stylistic precedent. Rounded, full-bodied images delineate the king as a living being rather than an abstracted icon. As Darius states in a building inscription from Susa (DSf, 15-18), "Ahuramazdā chose me as (his) man in all the earth," stressing his fundamentally human nature. Although proclaiming himself of flesh and blood, the king at the same time trumpeted the eternity of the empire. In his Bisotun relief which has Mesopotamian and Iranian antecedents, Darius does not capture a precise moment but presents an atemporal summary of revolts he quelled in forging his dominion (Root, 2000, p. 22). Likewise, the Persepolis Apadāna reliefs of endless tribute-bearers from across the land express the timeless, universal kingdom that was the result of historical acts. At its heart resides the king, pictured in the Persepolis Treasury reliefs, once adorning the Apadāna, receiving the emissaries.

On the door jambs of Persepolis (Palace of Darius, Palace of Xerxes, Apadāna, Throne Hall, Council Hall, Harem of Xerxes), the king is shown in a number of

standard guises. In scenes of the king walking forward under a parasol (Plate I) or being carried aloft on his throne, he is figuratively larger-than-life, overshadowing his attendants. The atlantid figures aligned beneath the platform of the throne are meant to be read as actual representatives of the nations of the empire, symbolically and physically supporting the king (as visible also in the cliff tomb façade carvings of the Achaemenid kings at Naqš-e Rostam, Plate II, and at Persepolis on the Kuh-e Raḥmat, in which the king stands on a platform lifted up by atlantids). Door jamb scenes of a royal figure battling lions (Plate III) and mythical beasts recall an age-old Mesopotamian topos (that became the royal Neo-Assyrian seal type). The motif bears kinship with the similarly ancient theme of a hero contesting animals. Commonplace in Neo-Assyrian/Babylonian and Late Babylonian period glyptic, the hero is usually dressed in a robe or kilt and can have wings; the hero bears no regal connotations. In Achaemenid seals, the role of hero may be played by a royal figure in Persian garb and crown. On the Persepolis door jambs, however, the figure grappling with a lion or monster looks like the royal figure except that he wears a filet rather than crown and strapped rather than strapless shoes (Root 1979, pp. 304-5). The figure's identity as king could thus be questioned but perhaps the fluidity is suggestive of a multi-faceted kingly stature that encompasses a supernatural heroic aspect.

Scenes of the king are often topped by the divine symbol of winged disk with human bust, rendering a direct connection between the one king and the one god. It has been remarked that the identical gesture of upraised arm with open palm made by the Persian king and the figure in the winged disk is revealing of a basic equality between the two (Root, 1979, pp. 174-76 and Soudavar, 2003, pp. 92-94, 41-45, and 2006, pp. 160-64, who discusses the king-god equivalence in the Sasanian era). The winged disk has a long pre-Achaemenid history in Mesopotamia and ultimately in Egypt. It consists of a disk that may contain a human bust and from which extend wings and feathered tail and sometimes ribbons. In the Achaemenid context, it has been taken to personify the god Ahuramazdā or the concept of*xᵛarənah* or *Farr(ah),* the radiance of divine glory/good fortune (for various opinions see Calmeyer, 1979 and 1984; Shahbazi, 1974 and 1980; Lecoq, 1984; Kaim, 1991, p. 33). It seems as if it is likely both, Ahuramazdā (or deity) particularly where the human figure of the god is present, and Farr(ah) where the winged disk is uninhabited. Abolala Soudavar (2003, pp. 3-4, 95-6, 123-24; Farr(ah) ii. Iconography of), who makes this case, believes the Ahuramazdā symbolism of the winged disk stems from an Achaemenid ideology and its Farr(ah)

symbolism from a pre-Achaemenid source appealing to non-Zoroastrians holding Mithraic beliefs for whom Farr(ah) was the fundamental aspect of kingship.

The deity in the winged disk proffers a ring to the king. The motif of a deity handing a ring, often accompanied by a rod, to a king, already employed in the Middle Elamite period (stele of Untash-Napirisha, the Elamite king of Anshan and Susa) survives through the Parthian and Sasanian periods in which it is central to compositions of imperial investiture. The ring symbol has a long history in Mesopotamia where it is usually paired with the rod. In the early second millennium Mesopotamian mural of Zimrilim in Mari, the deity extends the ring and rod toward the king and the action may also signify investiture. The Iranian ring, often beribboned, is generally agreed to be the ring or diadem of investiture. The ring, however, is a visual cognate on smaller scale of the disk of the winged disk and should likely be considered to be the cosmic essence of the divine radiance or Farr(ah) (Lecoq 1984, p. 322, raises the possibility of the ring being a Farrah equivalent). A circle can embody the visual understanding of city and by extension cosmic city or celestial world. In Neo-Assyrian reliefs military camp cities are shown as circular in plan; the so-called Babylonian world map tablet depicts a circular world with Babylon at its center, represented as a rectangle. The ring occurs in other contexts as well. In Achaemenid seals, a bust, probably of a deity, can appear within a disk or ring (Plate IV, top right, PT4-759); in Mesopotamia, the ring can be found as an icon atop standards which display divine emblems and may bear ribbons (as do the Sasanian rings). While not a deity per se, the ring, when situated on a standard usually supporting divine emblems, would manifest the divine realm. Conceivably, the Sasanian and Mesopotamian ribbons on rings parallel the banners that often stream from the winged disks. In 1946, Hans L'Orange (esp. pp. 90-102) already hypothesized that the ring symbolizes the "world ring of cosmocrator," the universe, the wheel of the zodiac.

If the ring is interpreted to be the celestial circle, the deity would literally be handing the king the universe and the right to rule it. The rod, then, may signal the terrestrial realm and the king's temporal power over it, just like Neo-Assyrian reliefs of king Assurnasirpal II (r. 883-859 BCE) in Nimrud portray him holding a vessel and a bow, where the vessel represents a divination bowl and signifies the king's ability to interpret the will of the gods (Winter, esp. pp. 260-62) and the bow refers to the king's regency over the

land. Creation myths of numerous cultures envision a primeval separation of sky and earth, with a pillar/rod acting as the axis that unites these realms (Seidenberg, pp. 194-95). A rod when depicted two-dimensionally forms a rectangle, which on the aforementioned Babylonian world-map symbolizes the earthly city of Babylon located within the circular universe. A fourth millennium Mesopotamian variant of the rod-and-ring, in which the two forms are joined, has been identified with the emblem for temple-door (Spycket, pp. 651-52), a reading in keeping with the interpretation of the rod and ring as heaven-and-earth, since the door to the temple marks the boundary between the two. Further, in the aforementioned Zimrilim investiture mural at Mari, the ring is painted red and the rod white, indicating that the actual objects were of different materials (Van Buren, p. 450). In Neo-Assyrian reliefs, red simulates golden objects and would be fitting for a heavenly disk; white may have evoked silver or rock crystal. Notably, in China, carved jades known as *pi* disks and *tsung* pillars were fashioned as early as Neolithic times and while their original meaning is elusive, later tradition associated the *pi* disk with heaven and the *tsung* pillar with earth. A scientific explanation suggests the disk and pillar were two elements of Neolithic astronomical instruments; the disk tracked the motions of the heavens by rotating around the pillar with hollow core, used as a sighting tube and earth-axis (Lee). Also in the Chinese context is a 12th century scroll (*Duke Wen of Jin Recovering his State*) on the topic of strong leadership that narrates a 7th century BCE tale about a prince seeking to establish his rule. One scene illustrates a follower of the duke handing him a *pi* disk, an analog of the Iranian compositions in which the king is handed the disk/ring at investiture and reinforcing the ring's identification as a symbol of the cosmic universe.

Achaemenid kings adopted millennia-old customs governing royal representation but endowed them with meaning particular to their philosophy of kingship. A symbolic system created across time and space came to articulate and advance the tenets of a new Persian world-order rooted in one of the forms of earlier Zoroastrianism.

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